

Wondering about What You Know

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Abstract: In a series of recent papers, Jane Friedman has argued that attitudes like wondering, inquiring, and suspending judgement are question-directed and have the function of moving someone from a position of ignorance to one of knowledge. Call such attitudes *interrogative attitudes* (IAs). Friedman insists that all IAs are governed by the following Ignorance Norm: Necessarily, if one knows Q at t , then one ought not have an IA towards Q at t . However, I argue that key premises in Friedman's argument actually point towards an opposing conclusion; namely, that (i) IAs are not governed by the Ignorance Norm, and (ii) IAs have functions other than moving someone from a position of ignorance to one of knowledge. I conclude that the Ignorance Norm should be rejected.

1. Introduction

In a series of recent papers, Jane Friedman has called attention to a family of attitudes that she claims are question-directed.¹ Taking my cue from Friedman, I will refer to all such attitudes as *interrogative attitudes* (IAs). According to this picture, IAs are the kinds of attitudes we have “when we try to figure something out, or work to acquire new information, or when we are searching for new knowledge”.² Examples of IAs include:

- (1) *Wondering* whether String Theory is true.
- (2) *Investigating* why the building collapsed.
- (3) *Inquiring* about how the thief escaped the building.
- (4) *Suspending judgement* about who will win the football match.

Significantly, Friedman posits that there is “a sort of incompatibility between knowing Q and having an IA towards Q .”³ This incompatibility is illustrated by the awkwardness of the following statement:

- (5) I am wondering whether the bank is open, but I know it is.

¹ Friedman (2013a; 2013b; 2015).

² Friedman (2013a: 145).

³ Friedman (2015: 9).

By Friedman's lights, (5) is problematic not because it is impossible to wonder about something one already knows, but because wondering (along with each of the other IAs) is governed by the following norm:

Ignorance Norm:

Necessarily, if one knows that **P** at *t*, then one ought not have an interrogative attitude towards whether **P** at *t*.⁴

According to the Ignorance Norm, if (at time *t*) one knows that the bank is open, then one should not (at *t*) wonder, investigate, inquire, or suspend judgement about whether the bank is open. In her paper "Why Suspend Judging?" Friedman sets for herself the task of explaining why IAs are governed by the Ignorance Norm. However, I shall argue that certain fundamental assumptions Friedman makes in her paper actually undermine her claim that IAs are governed by the Ignorance Norm.

2. A Terminological Clarification

Before I get to the main arguments of my paper, a minor bit of terminological clarification seems to be in order. Throughout her discussion, Friedman often seamlessly moves from talk of having an IA towards *Q* to talk of knowing *Q*, where *Q* stands for some question or other. In this regard, the following passage is fairly representative:

We can think of the situation this way: a subject with an IA towards *Q* is a subject for whom *Q* is open or unanswered or unresolved. But a subject who knows *Q* is a subject for whom *Q* is closed.⁵

Hence, Friedman often talks as if knowledge is a question-directed attitude, except that in the case of knowledge, the question is treated as already answered or "closed". This may seem like an innocuous manner of speaking given that knowledge, like IAs, can take the full range of interrogative complements described in (1)-(4). For example, all of the following statements seem fairly natural and unproblematic:

- (6) Jane knows *whether* String Theory is true.
- (7) Jane knows *why* the building collapsed.
- (8) Jane knows *how* the thief escaped the building.
- (9) Jane knows *who* will win the football match.

⁴ Friedman (2015: 10).

⁵ Friedman (2015: 10).

However, it is important to keep in mind that while ‘knows’ sometimes takes an interrogative complement, Friedman does not conceive of knowledge as an interrogative attitude. On the contrary, she points out that although ‘knows’ sometimes takes an interrogative complement, it can also take an indicative complement as well.⁶ In this respect, ‘knows’ differs from ‘wonders,’ ‘investigates,’ ‘inquires,’ and the other terms we use to pick out genuine IAs, which always take an interrogative complement.⁷ One implication of the fact that Friedman regards wondering as a genuine IA is that wondering does not have the same kind of content as knowing. This means that Friedman’s habit of seamlessly moving from talk of having an IA towards Q to talk of knowing Q is potentially misleading. Specifically, it may obscure the fact that the attitude of knowing actually shares the same kind of content as the attitudes of believing and remembering, and not the same kind of content as the IAs.

In order to avoid this potential point of confusion, I will use the locutions “knowing that **P**”, “believing that **P**”, and “remembering that **P**” to describe the traditional propositional attitudes of knowing, believing, and remembering, and the locutions “wondering whether **P**”, “inquiring whether **P**”, and “suspending whether **P**” to describe the question-directed attitudes of wondering, inquiring, and suspending judgement. This choice in terminology will allow me to (i) flag the fact that knowing, believing and remembering are genuine propositional attitudes rather than question-directed attitudes (which is something Friedman’s terminology potentially obscures), (ii) preserve Friedman’s intuition that wondering, inquiring and suspending are question-directed attitudes (thereby avoiding the charge that I am begging the question against her), and (iii) register that all six attitudes may be about the same state of affairs—i.e., someone may know that it is raining, believe that it is raining, remember that it is raining, wonder whether it is raining, inquire about whether it is raining, and suspend judgement about whether it is raining. Ultimately, I take this to be a friendly revision of Friedman’s terminology, one that more lucidly captures her distinction between propositional and question-directed attitudes.

3. The Suspension Thesis and the Ignorance Norm

As (4) illustrates, Friedman conceives of suspension of judgement as an IA. However, she holds that it is special among the IAs since it is entailed by every other IA. Hence, she maintains that “one has an interrogative attitude towards a question only if one is suspended about that question.”⁸ Call this claim the *suspension thesis*. As we shall soon see,

⁶ Friedman (2013: 147).

⁷ See: Friedman (2015: 6).

⁸ Friedman (2015: 10).

the suspension thesis plays an indispensable role in Friedman's explanation of why the IAs are governed by the Ignorance Norm.⁹

Consider the unhappy statement mentioned earlier:

(5) I am wondering whether the bank is open, but I know that it is.¹⁰

What makes (5) sound problematic, according to Friedman, is not that knowing that **P** and wondering whether **P** are not compossible.¹¹ On the contrary, there may be occasions in which we find ourselves wondering about something we already know. Friedman gives the example of someone, let us call her Beth, who temporarily forgets that she put her keys in her tennis bag. She spends the next 20 minutes wondering where she put her keys, until she finally recalls that she put her keys in her tennis bag. Friedman points out that insofar as Beth recalled where she put her keys, she did not learn anything new or acquire any new knowledge. This means that she knew where her keys were all along, including during the 20-minute interval when she was wondering where she put her keys. Friedman takes this to show that it is indeed possible to wonder whether **P** at *t* and know that **P** at *t*.¹²

What makes (5) sound problematic, according to Friedman, is the fact that wondering is governed by the Ignorance Norm. However, we need to exercise some caution when attempting to make sense of Friedman's diagnosis. Let us define a sincere declaration as an utterance that expresses a belief of the speaker. Someone who sincerely declares (5) does not necessarily violate the Ignorance Norm.¹³ This is because we are sometimes mistaken about whether or not we have a certain attitude. Indeed, when it comes to the attitude of knowing, mistaken self-attributions are fairly common. Suppose that the person who sincerely declared (5) were mistaken about the fact that they had knowledge. Such an individual would not be, strictly speaking, violating the Ignorance Norm since it would not be true that they were wondering whether **P** at *t* and also knew that **P** at *t*. At worst, they would simply be mistaken about the attitudes they self-ascribe. Moreover, whether or not (5) sounds problematic does not seem to be contingent on the speaker actually having the attitudes they self-ascribe. Indeed, even if we disbelieved or were unsure whether the speaker had the knowledge in question, (5) would still sound problematic. This suggests that the explanation of why (5) sounds problematic cannot be a straightforward matter of the speaker violating the Ignorance Norm.

⁹ See, especially, Friedman (2015: 16).

¹⁰ Although she is committed to the view that all IAs entail suspending judgement, most of Friedman's discussion focuses on the attitude of wondering. In order to preserve the continuity between my discussion and that of Friedman, I will do the same.

¹¹ For a defense of the view that knowing that **P** and wondering whether **P** are not compossible, see Stanley (2011: 42).

¹² Friedman (2015: 9).

¹³ This is not a point Friedman ever explicitly makes in her paper. However, I believe it is the most charitable way of understanding Friedman's explanation of why IAs are governed by the Ignorance Norm.

I believe a more precise formulation of why a sincere declaration of (5) sounds problematic is that the speaker self-ascribes a pair of attitudes that, together, violate the Ignorance Norm. In this respect, someone who sincerely declares (5) is akin to someone who sincerely declares (10):

(10) I disbelieve that the package will arrive today, but I believe it will.

The reason (10) sounds problematic seems closely related to norms prohibiting conflicting doxastic commitments. However, given that someone who sincerely declares (10) may be mistaken about their own doxastic attitudes, it is not necessarily the case that someone who sincerely declares (10) actually has conflicting doxastic attitudes. Moreover, even if we had good reason to believe that the speaker was mistaken about the doxastic attitudes they self-ascribe, (10) would still sound problematic. This suggests that self-ascribing a pair of attitudes that would violate a rational norm is problematic independent of whether one actually has the attitudes in question. Analogously, if someone were to sincerely declare (5), but also turned out to be incorrect about their knowledge self-attribution, we would not only chastise them for being mistaken about whether they had knowledge, but also (and quite independently) for self-ascribing a pair of attitudes that violate a rational norm.

Once we register that (5) is problematic because the speaker is self-ascribing a pair of attitudes that violate the Ignorance Norm, the question that immediately presents itself is this: what is wrong with violating the Ignorance Norm? Friedman's answer is that the person who violates the Ignorance Norm has inconsistent doxastic attitudes. She puts the point as follows:

But if knowledge entails belief, and the IAs entail suspension, then these cases feel a lot like doxastic conflict cases for good reason—they are cases that essentially involve basic doxastic conflict since they are cases in which subjects both believe and suspend at a time. At least some of the normative pressure to avoid having an IA while knowing is the normative pressure to avoid having conflicting doxastic commitments at a time.¹⁴

Hence, according to Friedman, violating the Ignorance Norm entails that one has inconsistent doxastic commitments. This means that violating the Ignorance Norm is at least as rationally objectionable as being doxastically inconsistent.

4. The Case Against the Suspension Thesis

In the present section, I wish to register some misgivings I have about the suspension thesis—i.e., the claim that wondering whether **P** entails suspending whether **P**. Compare the following two statements:

¹⁴ Friedman (2015: 10).

- (11) I am wondering whether the bank is open, but I *know* it is.
- (12) I am wondering whether the bank is open, but I *believe* it is.

Statement (12) does not sound problematic in the way that (11) does. Indeed, (12) is the sort of thing that would be naturally uttered by someone who believed that the bank was open, but who was less than completely certain. Indeed, we can imagine the person who uttered (12) making the following declaration instead:

- (13) I am wondering whether the bank is open—I believe it is, but I’m not sure.

(13) sounds even more natural and unproblematic than (12). Moreover, (13) self-ascribes the attitudes of wondering and believing. This suggests that it is sometimes unproblematic to self-ascribe the attitudes of believing that **P** at *t* and wondering whether **P** at *t*.¹⁵

The above observations pose a challenge to the suspension thesis. Let us assume that wondering entails suspending, as Friedman insists. It would follow that the agent who possessed the pair of attitudes described in (13) both believes that the bank is open at *t* and suspends judgement about whether the bank is open at *t*. However, by Friedman’s lights, someone who believes that **P** at *t* and suspends whether **P** at *t* has “rationally conflicting attitudes”.¹⁶ Insofar as it is rationally objectionable to have rationally conflicting attitudes, it follows that the person who has the attitudes described in (13) is in a rationally objectionable state. However, this runs counter to our earlier observation that (13) is unproblematic. Hence, if we wish to preserve the intuition that (13) is unproblematic, we should reject the suspension thesis.

In response to the preceding argument, it may be argued that it is sometimes unproblematic to simultaneously believe that **P** and suspend whether **P**. Such a view may seem particularly plausible in cases in which one believes that **P** with less than full certainty. However, it appears to be at odds with the particular conception of suspension defended by Friedman. Friedman defines suspending as an “attitude of committed neutrality.”¹⁷ This means that if one suspends whether **P**, one is committed to neither affirming nor denying the truth of **P**. However, believing that **P**, even with less than full certainty, entails being committed to the truth of **P**. Hence, simultaneously believing that **P** and suspending whether **P** involves conflicting doxastic commitments. On the present picture, if one found oneself so uncertain about whether the bank is open that one felt

¹⁵ I would like to thank an anonymous referee of this journal for suggesting the alternative declaration depicted in (13).

¹⁶ Friedman (2013: 169). Friedman also observes that most theorists would regard someone who simultaneously believes that **P** and suspends whether **P** as being in a “normatively defective state”: “Of course, most will want to say that a subject who both suspends about **Q** and believes one of **Q**’s complete answers is not only in some sort of conflicted doxastic state or has incoherent doxastic attitudes, but is in a normatively defective state. But this is par for this course”(2015: 4).

¹⁷ Friedman (2015: 3).

compelled to suspend judgment, then one would also be expected to stop believing that the bank is open, as opposed to simultaneously believing and suspending. After all, one should not continue to be committed to the truth of **P** if one recognized that one's level of uncertainty about **P** warranted neither affirming nor denying **P**. The takeaway is that so long as we follow Friedman in holding that suspending involves a commitment to neutrality, it would be rationally objectionable to simultaneously believe that **P** and suspend whether **P**.

5. The Case Against the Ignorance Norm

We now turn to my primary criticism of Friedman's account—namely, that one of the central assumptions Friedman makes in her defence of the Ignorance Norm actually undermines her claim that IAs are governed by the Ignorance Norm.

Consider the example of Beth, described earlier. Beth has forgotten that she put her keys in her tennis bag and this prompts her to wonder where she put her keys. Insofar as Beth is able to recall where she put her keys, Friedman claims that Beth always knew where she put her keys. It follows that Beth is simultaneously wondering where she put her keys and knows where she put her keys. One upshot of Friedman's analysis of the forgotten keys example is that Beth violates the Ignorance Norm. Moreover, since (according to Friedman) violating the Ignorance Norm entails that one has inconsistent doxastic commitments, and given that it is rationally objectionable to have inconsistent doxastic commitments, it follows that Beth is doing something rationally objectionable when she wonders where she put her keys. But is this plausible?

I think not. When one has forgotten something, wondering about it is sometimes the only or the most effective strategy for recalling what one has forgotten. Suppose that I have forgotten where I put my keys and that I am trying to recall where I put them. Suppose further that no new information is forthcoming with respect to the location of my keys. I have not written down the location of the keys on a post-it note, I am unable to consult someone who saw where I put my keys, and so on. Given that no other strategies for regaining the forgotten information is available, it would be natural for me to resort to wondering where I put my keys. Why? Because wondering where I put my keys is often an effective strategy for jogging my memory of where I put my keys. Indeed, it is easy to imagine cases in which wondering is the only strategy available for jogging one's memory. In such situations, and given that I have the goal of recalling what I have forgotten, wondering appears to be a rationally appropriate thing to do.

One response to the above objection would be to deny that Beth is genuinely wondering where she put her keys. For example, we may stipulate that an attitude counts as genuine wondering only if it could potentially move the wondering agent from a place of ignorance to a place of knowledge. On this view, given that Beth already knows where she put her keys (albeit that the knowledge in question temporarily escapes her view), she is not really

wondering where she put her keys. The problem with this suggestion is that it runs counter to Friedman's claim that knowing that **P** and wondering whether **P** are compossible. Indeed, Friedman's positing of the Ignorance Norm is dependent on this assumption of compossibility. After all, it makes no sense to have a norm that prohibits an impossible state of affairs. Hence, if we conceive of wondering in such a way that it is impossible to wonder whether **P** if one knows that **P**, then we undermine the idea that wondering is governed by the Ignorance Norm.

It is also worth noting that it is possible to amend the forgotten keys example to involve other IAs. Suppose that Beth has forgotten where she put her keys. Let us also stipulate that given enough time, Beth would eventually recall where she put her keys sans any external assistance and that Beth is aware of this fact. Since, by Friedman's lights, this could only be possible if Beth already knows where she put her keys, we may conclude that Beth knows that she put her keys in her tennis bag. Finally, let us suppose that Beth has good reason to believe that her friend, Alice, knows where she (Beth) put her keys. Perhaps Alice is known for being very observant and was present with Beth the entire time. Even if Beth is confident that, given enough time, she would eventually recall where she put her keys, we can imagine her deciding to save herself time and effort by simply asking Alice where she put her keys. But the act of asking Alice where she put her keys seems like a straightforward case of inquiry.¹⁸ Moreover, Beth's decision to ask Alice seems perfectly reasonable. However, according to Friedman, Beth is inquiring about something she knows. It follows that Beth is violating the Ignorance Norm when she asks Alice where she (Beth) put her keys.

Another potential response to the present line of criticism would be to grant that Beth does in fact violate the Ignorance Norm, but deny that she thereby does something rationally objectionable. However, I believe it would be a mistake for Friedman to adopt this line of reply. Let us assume that, despite violating the Ignorance Norm, Beth does not do anything rationally objectionable. Ex hypothesi, she does not do anything morally or prudentially objectionable either. It follows that someone may violate the Ignorance Norm without doing anything rationally, morally, or prudentially objectionable. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to identify any philosophically interesting sense in which Beth does something objectionable. But if violating the Ignorance Norm is not always objectionable in some sense, it becomes difficult to see how it qualifies as a norm at all. We seem left with something closer to a friendly suggestion than a norm.

But perhaps Friedman would be willing to weaken the Ignorance Norm in the manner just suggested. Hence, it may be claimed that even if Beth does not do something rationally, morally, or prudentially objectionable, she still finds herself in an epistemically

¹⁸ Admittedly, Friedman is primarily concerned with inquiry as a mental state rather than as a behaviour. However, Friedman appears committed to the view that some behavior counts as a genuine case of inquiry only if it is accompanied by an inquiring state of mind. (See: Friedman [2015: 6-7].) Hence, my claim that Beth's actions are a type of inquiry would, from Friedman's point of view, entail that she is in an inquiring state of mind.

less than ideal situation when she forgets where she put her keys. Perhaps this is what that Ignorance Norm is meant to capture. Unfortunately, this line of reply appears to have unhappy consequences as well. Beth's only failure seems to be momentarily forgetting something she knows. However, this appears to be a purely psychological failure, not a normative one. Moreover, even if we thought that temporarily forgetting where her keys were constituted a normative failure, it does not follow that the steps she takes to correct the situation also constitute a normative failure. Hurting my friend's feelings may constitute a moral failure, but apologizing and making restitution (i.e., the steps I take to correct the situation) are not also instances of moral failure. Hence, even if we grant that Beth is in a normatively less than ideal situation by forgetting where she put her keys, it would not follow that there is something problematic about her taking steps to correct this less than ideal situation. In sum, the norms we adopt should guard against us finding ourselves in less than ideal situations; they shouldn't forbid us from taking the steps we need to get ourselves out of those less than ideal situations.

6. Conclusion

The takeaway of the above discussion is that if we accept Friedman's analysis of the forgotten keys example, then we ought to reject the Ignorance Norm. What the forgotten keys example appears to illustrate is that knowing that **P** at *t* is not sufficient for **P** to be cognitively available in the way necessary for guiding one's action at *t*. Even though Beth knows that she put her keys in her tennis bag, this knowledge is not cognitively available in the way necessary for guiding her actions. If it were, then she would simply look in her tennis bag and retrieve her keys. This highlights another potential function of wondering, beyond the acquisition of new information or searching for new knowledge. Wondering also may serve the function of bringing back into view old, but temporarily unavailable, pieces of knowledge. If this is right, then the Ignorance Norm turns out to be too restrictive. In at least some cases, such as when what one knows escapes one's view, it may be rationally appropriate to wonder about what you know.

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